

Compte rendu de film

Colin Neal, Bill Brind, *Notman's World* Barry Cowling, Rex Tasker, *Fixed in Time:* *A Victorian Album*

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Neal, Colin (executive producer) and Bill Brind (producer). *Notman's World*. Directed by Albert Kish. National Film Board of Canada, 1989. 28 min. 58 sec.

Barry Cowling, Rex Tasker (producers). *Fixed in Time: A Victorian Album*. Directed by Shelagh Mackenzie. National Film Board of Canada, 1980. 19 min. 45 sec.

Photography dances precipitously on the edge of a lie. Arguably it captures reality with little editorial intervention, but it does so with a psychological sleight of hand. Its ability to render reality perfectly in two dimensions causes us to forget that it is, in fact, only an abstraction of the reality it apes.

Unlike other graphic arts like painting, drawing, sculpture, and so on, conscious interpretation does not intrude on our visceral understanding of the picture. We accept the information contained in the image as de facto truth, which is, of course, not the case at all. A photograph is a carefully engineered manipulation of visual symbols, intentionally assembled by a photographer to evoke a desired response from an intended audience.

From an infinite number of possible combinations, the photographer selects a particular place, at a particular time, views it from a particular vantage, and, at a chosen moment, arrests that time and place within the frame of his photograph. I will speak to the consequences of the photographer's decision at some length later. For now I would like to consider the significance of the mere action taken when one performs such a biopsy on time and place and culture.

The photograph, this frozen memory, enters the world rich with symbols and values with which the photographer imbued it. As time passes, those symbols and values ferment and grow, merging with others until they ripen into full-blown icons. Those fortunate enough to survive, and particularly those that pass into public hands where they become accessible to scholarly scrutiny, possess the ability to define the epoch from which they came. They become the stuff of our collective memory.

This is certainly the case with the work of William Notman, whose immense collection (immense seems like a little word to describe a collection of over 400 000 images!) resides in the McCord Museum in Montreal. Notman had studios across Canada and in the United States, and employed a raft of photographers who, over the course of three quarters of a century, recorded the young, vigorous, Victorian life that was nineteenth-century Canada.

The Notman enterprise was the subject of two National Film Board of Canada productions, which serve as the grist for this essay. (I will examine a rather handsome book, *The World of William Notman*, in a companion to this essay scheduled for publication in a subsequent issue of the *Material History Review*.) The first of these films, *Notman's World*, examines the rise to prominence of Notman and his gaggle of studios. The second, entitled *Fixed in Time: A Victorian Album*, examines the work of Oliver Massie Hall, who was proprietor of the Notman studio in Halifax.

Before I proceed with my examination of these films, let me say something regarding my qualifications for this task. I bring what I

consider to be a refreshing innocence to the topic. My ignorance of Canadian history is appalling and my knowledge of Notman and his work has heretofore been the one-line mention found in Robert Taft's classic work, *Photography and the American Scene*.

As the babe-in-the-woods, I was struck by how the photographer was shaped by his world, and he, in turn, shaped the world around him. Both films explore that wonderful world between reality and its shadows, where appearance transcends substance.

The sense of destiny and the greater sense of being British ooze from the photographs, which is of course what they are about. In *Notman's World*, Montreal in the 1850s is described as populated with a "mean and hungry business class" that generated a great deal of money. This money attracted a merchant and professional class - doctors, lawyers, bankers, and the like - eager to share in the new wealth.

When Notman arrived in that city in 1856 he found a ready-made market for his photographic skills. There was no old money in the city. Montreal was a city of nouveau riche who had a very real need for photographs. First, portraiture was an important symbol of status that fed the rather drafty arrogance of those who were now attaining some level of prominence. The photograph was also a way of reporting to those back in England on your situation. As the film adroitly points out, this was of particular importance for the large number of citizens who had left the homeland in steerage.

Fixed in Time explores articulately the relationship between the photographer and the subject, deftly pointing out that the craft of photography was not so much the technical mastery of the camera, but rather being able to manipulate skilfully the symbols within the photograph to communicate the sense that the sitter wanted to portray: the placement of a book to suggest literacy, a powerful stare implying manliness, a graceful draping of the hands to enhance femininity. On this very basic level one begins to see the intricate array of transactions that take place between the photographer, his subject, and the greater culture from which both come.

It is here that I find myself in strong disagreement with a point made early on in *Notman's World*. An unidentified voice, at the beginning of the film, makes the unequivocal statement: "We can't make of these photographs more or

less than they are. They are simply photographs." There are many things that these photographs may be, but simple they are not. Moreover, when viewed collectively they clearly become a great deal more than what they are, as I hope to demonstrate. It is fortunate that the film is blessed with an abundance of evidence to disprove its own point.

We are instructed that Canada was in the hands of expatriate Englishmen and Scots, who saw themselves and their various enterprises as part of an expanding destiny for the British Empire. This newly established upper class drew its ranks from three populations. The first were those who had acquired and developed land, of which Canada had an abundance. The second was a merchant class skilled in the manipulation of trade and commerce. The third was the military, particularly the officers' corps, which was made up of the second sons of the titled and social elite in England.

Also, Canada, the new part of the empire, was, like India, exotic in climate and geography. The idea of its wildness enhanced the self-image of the British citizen as conqueror.

This complex interaction of the sense of oneness with the Empire, the inevitability of progress, and uniqueness of the place, mix dizzily in the photographs. As I noted above, the photographs are more than likeness; they are an expression of a state of being, a condition of life.

Notman and his photographers were active and willing participants in the process of defining this vision of life and civilization. In 1858 Notman, then a young man, was hired by the railway to document the construction of the Victoria Bridge. At the dedication a year later, the photographer made a gift of the photographs, bound in leather and encased in a mahogany box with silver fittings, to the Prince of Wales, the event's guest of honour.

The photographs and their presentation so pleased the Prince's mother, Queen Victoria, that she bestowed upon Notman the title of "Photographer to the Queen." The aristocratic moniker made him the photographer of choice for his upwardly mobile clients, assuring him dominance of the portrait market.

In the 1860s, Montreal's population was swollen with British troops garrisoned there to keep an eye on the border while the United States engaged in the unpleasantness of the Civil War. The military has historically been a

hungry consumer of photographs. Soldiers are away from home, often in peril, admirably serving the needs of the homeland. For those who die in the line of duty, the photographs become a vehicle to cheat death by saving the likeness. For those who survive, the photographs bear witness to their time of noble service. For Notman, it meant an added demand for his camera.

Later, Notman launched a cadre of photographers to the far corners of Canada to collect "views," which he then sold to tourists and citizens alike. For the tourist, they were documents of their great adventure. For the citizen, they were evidence to send back to England to either show their new Victorian house, their civilized city, or, ironically, the wild beauty of the country around them.

The long and short of it was that Notman and his photographers captured that which was the essence of British success in the New World. In so doing, his collective work defines not so much the reality of that life, but rather the dream that drove it.

One segment of *Notman's World* clearly distinguishes the dream from the reality. Notman created a series of photographs dealing with the logging industry. In his photographs the lumbermen are portrayed as rugged men of the wilderness, doing battle with nature to reap its bounty for the good of the motherland.

What the photographs fail to show is that, far from being noble woodsmen, those who worked the forest were an exploited labouring class who were underpaid, known for a propensity toward strong drink, and sharply divided on ethnic and religious lines. The pictures of the large rafts of logs making their way downstream to be shipped to England fail to show the denuded countryside. In true imperial fashion, the mother country looted the natural riches of the colony.

Notman's photographs were also used by the railroad to craft a perception of Canada that would enhance its corporate profitability.

In 1884, the Notman Studio was hired to photograph along the Canadian Pacific Railroad line. The objective was twofold. First, the photographs were to demonstrate the natural beauty and majesty of the wilderness as a draw for tourists. Second, the photographs were to announce the bounty to be found in the west, with an eye toward attracting settlers who would farm the area and thus provide a steady clientele for the railroad.

The photographs of the wilderness, of course, failed to reveal Mother Nature's wrathful side. Tourists were ignorant of the caprice of weather and the threat of accidents. Farmers were not told that nature did not yield her bounty willingly, and that hard labour was often as not rewarded with drought, fire, and insect infestation.

So there is an intrinsic lie in Notman's inventory. It documents not the reality but the dream, and both *Notman's World* and *Fixed in Time* share that sense with their audience.

Two annoying features of *Notman's World* tarnish its message. Notman's story is periodically interrupted with a recitation of the technological history of photography. These segments, edited out of this film and put into their own, would be a nice introduction to that interesting story. But their idiosyncratic placement throughout the film is aggravating.

Also, the film's narrative is regularly interrupted with unidentified voices making pronouncements about Notman, his work, and the Canada of his time. The net effect of these nameless authorities is roughly that of an article peppered with text set off in quotation marks but lacking a footnote identifying the author of the statement.

But *Notman's World* and *Fixed in Time* do a fine job of what film does best. They give a sense of the world in which Notman lived, how his craft fit within it, and how he came to visually define the emerging Canadian nation.